

NICK CARTER

WEEKLY

H. O. LaPoint

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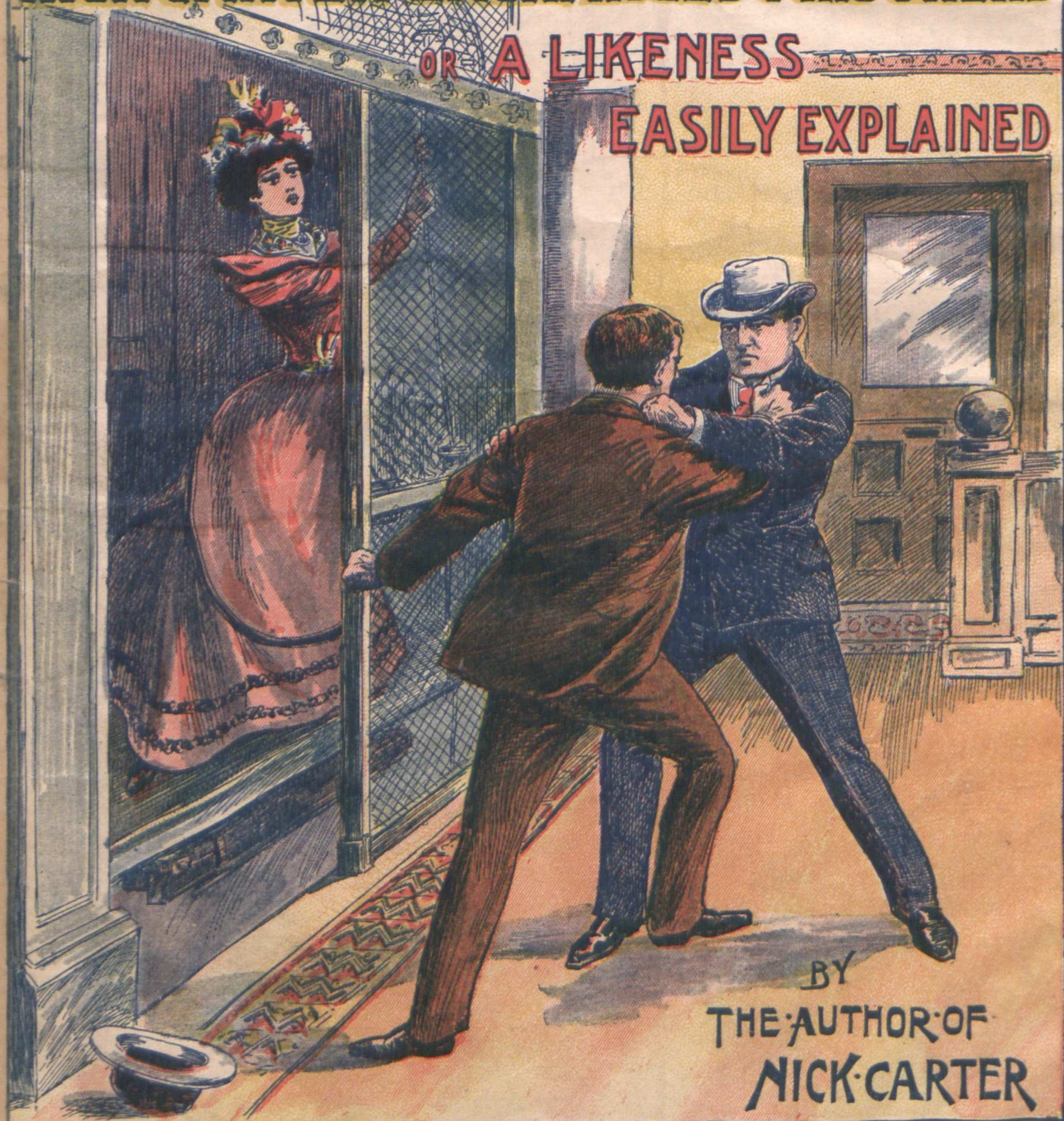
No. 149.

Price Five Cents.

NICK CARTER EXCHANGES PRISONERS

OR A LIKENESS

EASILY EXPLAINED



BY
THE AUTHOR OF
NICK CARTER

WHILE NICK AND THE VILLAIN WERE STRUGGLING THE YOUNG WOMAN SPRANG INTO THE ELEVATOR AND EXCITEDLY PULLED AT THE CABLE.

H. D. Lapoint

A New story, written specially for the Nick Carter Weekly, and will not appear in any other number.

NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

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Nick Carter Exchanges Prisoners

OR,

A LIKENESS EASILY EXPLAINED

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE CRIME OF MIDDAY.

It had been done in a whirl, a flash—a daring, an original, a sensational act of crime——

In staid, conservative Philadelphia, in broad daylight:

The theft of fifty thousand dollars in money and bonds.

It had occurred in public, at the very steps of the Commonwealth National Bank.

With business in full swing, the pavements crowded, a small fortune had been appropriated in a deft, an easy manner, by the smoothest rogue in Christendom.

And, seemingly, he had left not the slightest clew to his identity.

So slick had been the act—though done before the very eyes of the victim—that the victim in question was quiescent, unsuspecting for fully ten minutes after the crime had been committed.

And this money, this fifty thousand dollars, was a dowry—the price of the happiness of two devoted souls.

With the alarm finally given, like a sensitive instrument, feeling every pulsation of the great body politic, the local police system instantly vibrated to the details of the startling sensation of the hour.

First to Central Headquarters the news flew by telephone from the bank, and was thence immediately wired to every substation in the city.

Like a hive disturbed, that guardian body hurried forth—fluttered, burrowed, retreated, retired, beaten back by plain facts the very simplicity of which was bewildering.

Then the Chief of the service, confronted by an extraordinary responsibility, did a wise thing.

This was to repeat what he had done more than once before in his professional career.

He telegraphed to New York City for the celebrated detective, Nick Carter.

The crime had occurred at twelve o'clock, sharp.

At five the famous secret service expert arrived at the Broad street depot on the fast limited.

Thus, exactly five hours after the crime had been committed, Nick Carter entered the private office of the Philadelphia Chief of Police.

With manifest gratefulness and relief, that important public official welcomed his expected visitor, with both hands extended.

"I have been waiting for you," he said, frankly.

"What have you done in the case?" inquired Nick Carter.

"Nothing."

"Then what do you expect of me?"

"To listen to a brief explanation."

"I am ready for that," replied Nick, all attention.

"I am about to inform you of the largest theft perpetrated in Philadelphia since 1892."

"Go ahead," directed Nick, settling himself in an easy-chair.

"At twelve o'clock to-day," narrated the Chief of Police, "a carriage drove up in front of the Commonwealth National Bank on Chestnut street."

"A private conveyance?"

"No, one hired for the occasion."

"And the number of the cabman?" inquired Nick.

The Chief's brows clouded impatiently; he was familiar with Nick Carter's careful, critical way of investigating things, but, under his present strain of anxiety, he resented it.

"No point in that, Mr. Carter!" he declared, sharply.

"Why not?"

"We know the man; he is straight as a string."

"All right—proceed, then."

"The vehicle contained a pretty serving-maid."

"Name?"

"Mary Bronson."

Nick had a blank card in his hand; he made a brief note without taking his eyes from the Chief's face.

"She had been dispatched from the Continental Hotel by her mistress."

"Name—again?"

"Mrs. Lovett Warren, of Byrn Manor. She had accompanied this lady and her daughter, Lucille, from their country home to the city this morning. The purpose was to transfer into real estate securities a special deposit at the bank amounting to over fifty thousand dollars."

"In money?"

"And bonds."

"You have the numbers and description of the latter?" inquired Nick.

"Not yet."

"I will attend to that," said the detective, making another note.

"This money, in fact, constituted the dowry of Miss Lucile Warren," proceeded the Chief.

"She was soon to be married?"

"To Mr. Edwin Lewis, a young broker of this city. The money and bonds were in a small satchel. Mrs. Warren was not feeling very well, and instead of going to the bank herself as she had originally intended, she gave a written order to her maid and sent her."

"She must have supreme confidence in this maid."

"She had brought her up from an infant; she was a favored charge, and trustworthy."

"This was the person who was driven to the bank?"

"At twelve o'clock Mary Bronson entered the bank, and proceeded to the window of the cashier."

"Why this irregularity?"

"He is a friend of Mrs. Warren, and

even personally knew the maid. As I have explained, the contents of the satchel were a trust rather than a deposit."

"I understand."

"The cashier spoke pleasantly to the girl, took the order, had her indorse it, and brought the satchel from the vault."

"Did he verify the contents?"

"Before the sight of the girl, yes; he is a careful, methodical man."

"And then?"

"The girl left the bank, went to the carriage, and stepped into it."

"She got that far in safety?"

"That far. She placed the satchel on the cushioned seat at her side, and settled herself, ready to start back for the hotel. This could not be done at once."

"Why not?"

"There was a slight jam of vehicles, and the driver was holding in his horses and indulging in 'a roasting' of a truckman who had nearly locked wheels with him."

"Mary Bronson closed the carriage door herself. Just then she was aware that some one was coming towards her."

"From the bank?"

"Yes. In a doorway that she supposed to be a private entrance to the bank, a man had appeared. He wore a thin office coat and the little bib or apron usually worn by some paying tellers."

"Ah!" commented Nick, softly and thoughtfully.

"A pen was stuck behind his ear. He was bareheaded. The fingers of one hand were daubed with ink."

"He tripped jauntily down the steps, glided across the pavement, dodging passing pedestrians. He bowed courteously, deferentially to the pretty maid through the open carriage window, and said, 'Beg pardon, miss—but there is a slight mistake.'"

"The girl bit?" interrogated Nick, significantly.

"She innocently and promptly handed out the satchel when 'the cashier's confidential clerk, informed her that the cashier desired to take the number of the bonds; he would return the satchel in a few moments. Back into the bank the man went."

"You mean the bank building?"

"Of course; within it the fellow disappeared. She waited ten minutes. She began to grow uneasy, and then alarmed and suspicious. At last she left the carriage and went into the bank to inquire."

"Hysterics! Tears?"

"And the fifty thousand dollars vanished!"

"And the driver?" asked Nick.

"Engrossed in bickering, during the swift dash of the clerk, he had noted nothing."

"Nobody in the bank, no passersby, saw the man?"

"Not a soul that we could locate."

"Then the story rests solely on the unsupported statement of Mary Bronson?"

"That's just it. The bank officers summoned us. The girl lay in a dead faint. We took her to the hotel, and saw Mrs. Warren and her daughter. The old lady was prostrated at the news; the daughter—a superb creature—was fairly crushed."

"Your men investigated?"

"And I myself personally."

"What did you find out?"

"The thief had employed a dark passage way running the length of the bank building, to make his play and his escape."

"Did you find anything there?"

"A pen, an old office coat, a bank apron."

"Nothing more?"

"No."

Nick arose to his feet.

"It seems to me," he observed, "that Mrs. Lovett Warren's blind confidence in

her serving maid has cost her fifty thousand dollars."

"But——"

"Yes," anticipated Nick—"you expect something better than formal generalities from me? Well, we shall see—later."

"Where first?" inquired the Chief, following Nick's example and taking up his hat.

"To the Continental Hotel, of course."

"To interview Mrs. Lovett Warren?"

"And her maid, this Mary Bronson," said Nick Carter.

———

CHAPTER II.

THE DETECTIVE'S EYE.

The detective and the Philadelphia Chief of Police did not find Mary Bronson at the Continental Hotel when they arrived there.

In the reception-room of a neat suite the two professional visitors were greeted by Miss Lucille Warren.

At a glance Nick discerned that his companion had not overestimated her.

She was indeed a peerless creature, and her artless innocence, combined with a laudable effort to bear up under sudden calamity, at once won Nick's sympathy.

"I fear that you cannot see my mother," she said, when the Chief had explained their mission and his introduction of an expert in detective science.

"She is much depressed?" asked the Chief.

"She is utterly prostrated. Have you any favorable news, sir?"

"None as yet," the officer was forced to admit. "But——"

"Yes, I understand," said the girl, with a deferential glance at the detective. "Of course we have heard of Mr. Carter——"

"Who wishes to have a few minutes' conversation with Mary Bronson," suggested the Chief.

"She is not here," said Miss Warren.

"Not here?"

"No. Poor Mary! she has been nearly frantic. It was not until an hour ago that I could make her understand that we considered this matter a misfortune she could not have anticipated. I sent her for a friend whose counsel I felt we needed."

Nick expressed a mute inquiry through a look.

"I mean Mr. Edwin Lewis," continued the young lady, flushing slightly.

"Oh! she has gone to his office?" interrogated the Chief.

"Or to his home—wherever he may be."

"Then she will return soon?"

"I expect her every moment. Please be seated, gentlemen."

Nick had scanned the girl closely, but had failed to detect anything but genuine candor in all that she said—gentle reliance on the lover she was so soon to wed, entire confidence in the unfortunate serving maid.

They heard her moving about in an adjoining apartment, whence utterances incoherent and vivid by turns betrayed the presence and condition of the suffering mother.

Nick glanced repeatedly at his watch, as half an hour passed and the tedious wait carried them close to six o'clock.

"That girl has been gone nearly two hours," he observed at length.

"And time is valuable," remarked the Chief. "Ah, Miss Warren! a word, if you please."

The young lady had re-entered the room on some trivial mission; she approached the speaker inquiringly.

"If you will give us Mr. Lewis' address, we may hasten things by overtaking or intercepting your maid," he explained.

The girl opened her lips to speak. Then a swift suspicion evoked by the

Chief's grave face caused her to start violently.

She gave a little gasp.

"Surely!" she exclaimed, "you do not suppose that Mary Bronson——"

"My dear young lady," interrupted Nick, gently, "we simply wish to economize time."

Miss Warren penciled two addresses on a card and tendered the same; her visitors withdrew.

In the street below they engaged the first cab.

Mr. Edwin Lewis was not at his office; they found its door closed and locked, and the janitor informed them that its usual occupant had left as early as three o'clock.

They next drove to the home address furnished by Miss Lucille Warren.

It was a two-story brick dwelling on a quiet, reputable street.

Its lower part was unoccupied; the street door leading to the staircase was open.

"There seems to be no one up there," observed the Chief.

It was getting on towards dusk now, and no light was visible in the suite of rooms presumably tenanted by the young broker.

Nick led the way up the stairs. Arrived at the top step, he faced a door and tapped at it.

There was no reply.

Nick turned the knob. Somewhat to his surprise, the door readily yielded to his pressure.

He stepped into the room. In the dim twilight, and with the shades all down, only vague outlines were discernible.

They stood stationary near the threshold for a moment or two, while the Chief tapped sharply with his knuckles on the door frame.

At the same time he asked distinctly:

"Is there anybody here?"

There was no response.

"Queer!" he commented — "door open."

"We must have a further look," said Nick, in his masterly way.

He struck a match.

"Ah!" uttered the Chief, sharply.

Nick took a bare glance, and carried the flickering splinter over towards the gas jet.

"Now, then!" breathed the Chief, expectantly.

In the bright glare suddenly furnished, that showed which caused the Chief to prick up his ears in a ferret-way.

"Suspicious!" he exclaimed.

"Peculiar," observed Nick Carter, more quietly.

He held his companion stationary by pressing him slightly back with his hand.

Nick glanced keenly all about the apartment.

Then, assured that an advance would not disturb anything from its present condition, he went over to a desk, to a fireplace, to a rear door, in turn.

Indications were both suspicious and peculiar, indeed!

The desk showed signs of having been hastily rifled.

The waste basket at its side was half-filled with minute fragments of paper.

In the grate was a litter of burned paper.

The rear door was open—had been left open—as though some one had abandoned the place in a hurry.

The litter in the grate, a black mountain of burned paper filaments, bulged up as though a log of wood lay half-consumed beneath.

Near the grate was a handkerchief—a lady's handkerchief.

The eyes of the Chief of Police were snapping with excitement.

He uttered occasional ejaculations, he nodded his head emphatically, and there crossed his face fitful gleams of satisfaction and decision.

His ideas finally found utterance in one sentiment of profound conviction:

"There was no robbery at the bank!"

"Ah! you think so?" interrogated Nick, proceeding to the rear door and examining its lock.

"Why, of course! Mary Bronson got that fifty thousand dollars. There was no sham clerk—and she had an accomplice."

"Meaning?"

"It must have been Miss Warren's lover, Edwin Lewis, the young broker."

"Well—what then?"

"Perhaps he was at and near the carriage at the bank, and of course he knew about the intended transfer of those securities. Mary Bronson simply slipped the satchel to him, made her play, and —"

"Came here."

"As we know. That handkerchief—see, Mr. Carter!" continued the Chief, snatching up the piece of cambric and discovering the initial letter in its corner: 'M.' This handkerchief belonged to the serving-maid."

"You are right. What then?"

"The broker was in love with her; she is an amazingly pretty girl. They decided to leave the country."

"With the fifty thousand dollars?"

"Of course not without it. He made hurried preparations. Observe—he has emptied his desk. He tore up his private papers. He burned up other documents, and—— Ah! it is extremely simple, but—that settles it finally!"

The Chief threw out his hands as though the affair was not worth further question or discussion.

For Nick had seized a poker and had applied it in the fireplace.

The mountain heap of airy cinders collapsed, and as they did so, underneath, half burned, was revealed a small leather satchel.

"You see?" cried the Chief.

"I see a satchel, yes," nodded the detective.

The Chief dragged it out. He eagerly scanned its surface.

He burst it open and looked inside; it was empty.

"According to description," he proceeded, "this is Mrs. Lovett Warren's bank satchel. Mr. Carter, this is a lucky visit; we have found out everything."

"It seems to me," suggested Nick, "that we have simply found a satchel."

"But the satchel! To me the robbery is as clear as crystal! They have fled the country—those two. Why, if the last proof were lacking," excitedly added the Chief, "behold it here!"

He darted toward a sofa, on which, outspread, lay some route tables of Southern, Mexican, and South American railroad and steamship lines.

Nick looked them over; he burrowed in the waste basket, and then he scooped up a handful of the cinder litter in the grate, applying to it his magnifying glass. He straightened up seriously.

"Wrong," he observed.

"Who is wrong?" demanded the Chief, aggressively.

"You."

"My discovery——"

"Theory."

"You say it is wrong?"

"Yes. I declare it positively."

"Why?"

"Your inferences are natural," replied Nick, "but you have not taken the trouble to look beneath the surface."

"Have you?"

"I think so."

The Chief was dumfounded. He fancied the famous detective was off the track for once in his life, but he did not say so outright.

"If this is not a clear case of fraud, elopement——" he began.

"It is neither," declared Nick. "This

is purely and simply, Chief, a set-up affair, and not even a clever one."

"I wish you would explain," remarked the amazed Chief.

"Those private papers in the waste basket——"

"Yes?"

"Look over a few of the fragments; they are ordinary business memoranda, six months old, and in no respect secret or important."

"Is that so?"

"It is so. Those 'documents' in the grate——"

"Well?"

"Newspapers—solely."

"The time-tables?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"And the satchel—the open rear door—the hurried flight?"

Nick passed to that door. He called the attention of his companion to its lock.

"If you will notice," he remarked, "this door was forced, not unlocked."

"By whom?"

"The thief—the real thief."

"Not Mary Bronson?"

Nick shook his head.

"Nor the young broker?"

"Nor Mr. Edwin Lewis. The girl told the truth. There was a thief at the bank. Fearing her later identification, he watched his opportunity to get her out of the way, and found it."

"Here?"

"Where else? He sought, further, to create a motive for her guilt, and he has made it appear that Mr. Edwin Lewis incited her to the theft and has fled the country with her."

"Then, added to the theft, is abduction—the spiriting away of these two people?"

"That is the way in which I construe it."

The Chief looked puzzled, troubled,

dissatisfied. His pet theory had been tumbled like a house of cards.

"It must be an extraordinary criminal——" he began.

"It is an extraordinary criminal," assured Nick, "and under it all, I am beginning to suspect there lies an equally remarkable plot."

"You mean affecting the Warrens?"

Nick did not reply. He left the room by the rear door for a few moments, came back, and began drawing on his gloves.

"You are going to leave here?" asked the Chief, in a dazed way.

"Yes, there is no time to lose," answered Nick, briskly.

"You mean?"

"I intend to get on the track of the thief, and his new victims. You are inclined to push things along to that conclusion?"

"Of course."

"May I ask you, then, to summon an officer to take charge here to-night, without disturbing things?"

"Certainly."

"Then, if you will wrap up that half-burned satchel, I would like you to take the cab below, and go to the Continental Hotel——"

"I see—you wish Mrs. Warren to identify it?"

"Yes—to settle that point. I also desire you to get photographs of this Mary Bronson and the young broker."

"And yourself?" the Chief inquired.

"I will join you at headquarters before nine o'clock."

"You are going——"

"First," answered Nick, "to the bank."

"To the Commonwealth National Bank?"

"Where the crime occurred."

"Why! what do you hope——"

"Everything," answered Nick, definitely. "There was the starting point of this affair."

"That is true, but——"

"As such it must give some hint, some clew, to the man who stole those fifty thousand dollars!"

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN FROM DENVER.

Seven hours had now elapsed since the theft of the satchel at the bank.

Nick Carter went straight to the spot where the crime had been committed.

It was late, dark, the trail was cold; there had been ample time for the criminal to cover his tracks, but Nick never despaired of alighting upon some clew.

The detective made a general inspection of the bank building proper.

From the Chief's description he was able to locate the passageway from which the thief had operated.

The building was open, though untenanted at present, but a light burned at each staircase landing for the convenience of possible late office occupants.

Nick visited each floor in the building, reading the names on the glass panels of the various doors.

"It looks straight from dome to basement," he soliloquized, returning to the ground floor.

He now inspected the passageway which led clear through the building to the rear.

The clever thief had chosen a fit spot for his operations.

The dark and shadowy passageway had afforded him a safe and convenient dressing-room.

Then, having secured the satchel, all he had to do was to traverse it to the rear, cross a court, and take his choice of any one of half a dozen routes to any one of three different street frontages.

Where a door seemed to cover a stairway leading to the cellar of the place there was a slight angle in the passageway.

Nick noticed this, and decided that

this spot the thief must have chosen to make his "lightning changes."

While he was looking this area over, the detective stepped nearer to the extreme side of the passageway.

There was a window here, but it came so closely up to the adjoining building that only a little light could have penetrated in the day-time.

It was used rather for ventilating purposes, and inside of it a half circular iron railing ran.

This protected a perfectly clear and ungrated opening leading into the cellar space below.

It looked as though at present the janitor of the building used this aperture to sweep his dust and rubbish out of sight.

Nick—who noticed everything—as he arrived at this discovery, discerned a cloth object which had been caught on a nail in the wall just at the floor edge.

"A cap," he observed, scanning closer.

He leaned over the railing and secured it, and turned it over in his hand.

It was an expensive, an almost new, tourist cap.

No person would be likely to sweep or throw it into the rubbish heap, and Nick wondered how it had got there.

He took out his dark lantern, lit it and shot the rays down into the half-circular open space.

Nick's investigating tendencies were both aroused and rewarded by what he saw next.

The nail head from which he had taken the cap and where it had caught lightly bore a distinct splotch of blood mixed with several strands of human hair.

"The conclusion is irresistible," theorized the detective at once—"some one has fallen or has been thrust through that space. His head grazed that nail—he left his cap behind."

The event must have happened recently—certainly since the janitor had dis-

posed of his sweepings early that morning.

Nick loosened a fragment of plaster from a broken spot in the wall, poised it, dropped it, counted the seconds.

"A cement floor ten feet down," he calculated.

The detective glanced up and down the passageway. Nobody, it seemed, was likely to pry or interfere.

He lifted himself over the iron railing and dropped down at arm's length; then, releasing his hold, he landed lightly on a hard surface floor, as he had calculated.

Nick now flashed his dark lantern once more.

"Ah!" murmured the detective, rousing up to profound interest and speculation.

In various parts of the cellar were heaps of sweepings.

There were broken boxes and wrecks of abandoned office furniture.

A little away from the proximity of the aperture was a battered double desk.

Fairly under it was a heap huddled up, and distinctly human.

The head, face and hands were partly burrowed in a mass of old newspapers and shavings.

The feet were visible entire.

Nick approached.

He could trace a moist, splotched spot where this man must have landed in falling.

From here to the desk was a clear broad space where he must have slid.

His head had struck the desk, doubling him up, but he must have been going with a force and rapidity that carried him a few feet farther under it.

Nick touched the extended soles of the presumably insensible man.

There was a quiver; he repeated the operation more vigorously.

There was a groan.

"Get up!" ordered Nick.

An unintelligible mumble responded.

Nick stood back, for he had succeeded in rousing up the sleeping or unconscious stranger.

Whether or not the fellow had any connection with the crime of the day, the detective was resolved to investigate him fully.

The man gathered strength and wakefulness as he backed out of his singular burrow.

He arose to a sitting posture at last, blinking and shrinking as the dazzling focus of the dark lantern struck his face.

Then he came to his feet with a readiness that was athletic.

Around to his hip pocket his hand swung, quick as lightning.

"Stand back!" he shouted, hoarsely.

A weapon—new, bright and ugly-looking—stole into view.

"Put that up!" ordered Nick, sharply.

"I don't know about that!"

"Who are you?"

"I—— That's who I am."

With his left hand the man suddenly threw back a vest lappel.

Upon it gleamed a neat seven-pointed star.

Even at the distance of six feet, Nick's keen eyes made out the black, indented tracery of a word. It was:

"Detective."

"Oh!" he observed—"I see."

"You see, then, that I am not a man to be trifled with!"

"Do you do that often, my friend?" asked Nick, a little satirically.

"Do what?"

"Advertise your profession?"

The man was a trifle humbled and embarrassed at the incisive raillery in Nick's tones.

"I—I've had a tumble, I'm mixed up," he muttered, feeling his head.

Then he braced up considerably and put on a certain dignity.

"I remember, now," he continued,

"where I am. I wished you to know that I have a right here."

"Oh, certainly."

"That I am here in the pursuance of duty."

"Some especial duty, is it?" inquired Nick in an interested tone.

"Slightly!"

"Might I ask——"

The man interrupted with a penetrating look.

It died down to a certain perplexed expression of the eyes as if he were wool-gathering in quest of some confused connection in regard to the duty in question.

"I am Daniel Dorval, of Denver," he declared.

Nick bowed courteously.

"A detective, I think you said?"

"Yes"—stiffly. "I suppose you are the janitor?"

"Oh, no!"

"What, then?"

"Well," said Nick, "I am somewhat in your own line."

"How! the police?"

"That is it."

The Denver man pantomimically asked Nick to show his credentials.

"I read your thought," announced Nick, with a smile. "Only, my friend, I do not find it politic, or always safe, to wear a tag. Still, I assure you that I just came from the presence of the Philadelphia Chief of Police."

"Why! if that is so, you can introduce me."

"Do you need an introduction?"

"I fear I do, for I have lost my man."

"You had found one, had you?"

"I was shadowing one."

"Where from?"

"Clear from Denver."

"And you missed him here?"

"Yes."

"In Philadelphia?"

"Right in this——"

The Denver man glanced about him to make sure of his bearings.

"This is a bank building on Chestnut street, is it not?" he inquired.

Nick nodded assentingly.

"Then I lost him right in this building."

"When?"

"What time is it now?"

"Nearly eight o'clock in the evening."

The Denver man gave a start.

"Why" he exclaimed, "then I have been lying here—idle, useless—nearly eight hours?"

Nick experienced a growing interest in this man.

"Eight hours, eh?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Then you took up your quarters here about noon, I should assume?"

"You assume right."

"That was the hour when you lost your man?"

"When I lost him."

"And how did you come to lose him?"

"I was watching him. He had scarcely been out of my sight for three days."

"He came from Denver?"

"He did."

"And you were shadowing him?"

"That's it. He came to this building to-day; I didn't know why—I don't now—but I saw that he was up to something that looked as if he would linger about here for a spell."

"How was that?"

"Oh! he flitted to the street and back, and he had a bundle that he placed on the window sill."

"On the next floor?"

"Yes. During one of his visits to the street end of the passageway I slipped down that hole yonder. By bracing on a protruding brick in the wall I could steady myself, peer up through the railing, and watch his every move."

"A good idea."

"I saw some singular maneuvers on the

part of the fellow. He came, he went—he flitted out, he flitted in. At last he reappeared from the street with a satchel.

Nick's face brightened up; he had struck an exceedingly promising trail!

"Hold!" he said—"what kind of a satchel?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE OAK BOX.

The man from Denver described; Nick let him talk without interruption for a full two minutes.

The detective had found a witness in the robbery case.

This man had seen the thief who had so cleverly duped Mrs. Lovett Warren's serving maid.

More than that, he knew all about him. Nick did not prolong the present interview.

He ascended the open flight of steps leading up from the cellar, applied to the lock a convenient attachment of his unique pocket knife, and briefly said:

"Follow me."

It was with a stiff clumsiness that his companion made the ascent.

"Where?" he asked, gaining the passageway, wincing with slight twinges of pain.

"You wish to see the Chief of Police?" said Nick.

"Yes—I think I had better. He may be able to help me out."

"Very well—I will take you to him."

"Now?" questioned the Denver man, with a glance over his disordered attire.

"Right away. Here is your cap."

"I am not in the best trim for a very brisk jaunt."

"We will take a cab."

It was fifteen minutes later when Nick reached Central Police Headquarters.

The Chief had not yet returned, but his secretary, with deference and alacrity,

showed Nick and his companion into the Chief's private consultation room.

"We may have to wait for a while," suggested Nick. "Suppose we talk over things till the Chief arrives?"

The man from Denver seemed a little reluctant.

"I'll tell you, plainly," he blurted out, "I don't understand your finding me, and your queer questions about the man I was after."

"Oh, that is easily made clear," assured Nick. "Your man has been turning a clever trick at the Commonwealth National Bank, and we are after him as well as you."

"Is it true?" exclaimed the other, startled.

"Yes—he got away with fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand dollars!"

"In money and bonds. They were in that satchel. You saw him fit himself up in office trim—I will relate how it happened."

Nick did so, confining himself strictly to the bank end of the transaction.

By the time he had concluded the Denver man's eyes had opened very wide.

"That makes a complication," he observed.

"In what way?" questioned Nick.

"I want him?"

"Yes."

"And, of course, you want him."

"Well?"

"If you get him, you stop his career."

"Should it not be checked?"

"Why, I'll tell you," said the Denver man, slowly—"it would seriously interfere in my plans."

"Oh! I think we can adjust all that. You will certainly admit, my friend, that a theft of this magnitude is no trivial or every-day matter?"

"I don't know that!"

"Your case against this man is more important?"

"I think so; you shall judge: I want him on a deal of five hundred thousand."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nick.

"Yes—I am trying, through him, to find Wordell and McEnery, the two men who salted, floated and wrecked the Big Ravine Mining Company, of Silverton, Colorado."

Nick had incidentally heard of that famous fiasco.

"He was a familiar with those two choice spirits, was he—this man of yours?" inquired Nick.

"He was a partner—a silent one."

"But you cannot directly connect him?"

"No. I want to find the two principals. I have been shadowing this man for weeks. When he started East, I started after him. I am hopeful that he is headed for the people I expect to finally reach."

"I see."

"This Devereaux——"

"Who?" interrogated Nick, sharply.

"That is his name—Captain Montague Devereaux."

Nick Carter was evidently moved; instantly he consulted a tiny memorandum book which he took from his vest pocket.

It was a reliable and inestimable treasure of compactness and utility.

"There is only one Captain Montague Devereux that I ever heard of," he remarked.

"I do not think there is more than one," said the Denver man.

"Devereaux, who got ten years for a daring forgery in England."

"That is the man!"

"Who recently ended a smaller sentence in Oregon for raising something less than a million on quick-silver stock."

"That is my Devereaux!"

"Free?"

"Why not? You are well informed; I have his picture. There it is."

The Denver man exhibited a police album card.

"Yes," nodded Nick, after a careless

glance—"I have his picture at home. So this is our man?" he added, musingly. "Thanks."

"You did not know?"

"Not in the slightest. You have done us a vast favor, Mr. Dorval."

"In spoiling my own plans!"

"I will assure you that they shall not be 'spoiled.'"

"Will the Chief assure it?" asked Dorval.

"Will you not take my word?" inquired Nick.

"You see, I don't know you?"

There was a pencil pad at Nick's elbow. He wrote two words and turned the sheet toward his companion.

"What!" ejaculated the man from Denver, as if he were thrilled.

"Will you trust me?"

"Nick Carter!"

"Yes."

"You are Nick Carter?"

"None other."

"And I've been—— Say! cross me out and let me begin all over again!"

"Oh! that is not necessary. This has been a fortunate meeting for me, Mr. Dorval, and I hope we shall become better acquainted."

The Denver man was evidently one of that large and growing number that had heard of Nick Carter.

He was ready to confine himself indefinitely to apology and humility, but Nick checked all that.

"Perhaps," suggested Nick, "Philadelphia was your man's final terminus."

"No," asserted Dorval, positively.

"Where, then?"

"He was headed for New York."

"You had an opportunity to learn that?"

"Ample. His original ticket was for that point—Philadelphia was an afterthought, a necessity."

"Why do you say a necessity?"

"Well, at Chicago he struck a slick

crowd of gamblers in the smoking section."

"I see—they cleaned him out."

"Pretty nearly, although they were close friends by the time they reached here. They wanted him to stop over, and he consented."

"When was this?"

"Day before yesterday."

"Have you watched him pretty closely since then?"

"I missed him just one spell."

"When?"

"Last evening. He slipped me and went out in the country."

"You don't know how far?"

"I don't, but it took him less than four hours."

Nick made a mental note.

The man had probably gone to Byrn Manor.

If this were true, he must have known the Warrens in the past, or something about them and their circumstances.

Slowly but steadily the seemingly deft raid of a practical bank sneak, forger and all-around crook appeared to assume the proportions of a formidable and systematic plot.

"I think, therefore," theorized Dorval, "that Devereaux stopped over at Philadelphia to recoup his finances. To him the taking of a big trick like that is no more than the average sneak thief robbery of a grocery till."

"Less; he is very clever."

"And daring. Still, figure it out as you will, I do not think he counted originally on making this haul."

"It was New York?"

"Yes, for he telegraphed there several times on the route."

"To whom?"

"Oh, I don't know that."

"You did not find out?" expressed Nick, amazedly.

"I—— Well, we can't all be Nick Carters! And he shipped his box there."

"His box?"

"Yes, a long, queer affair, that he had marked 'Curios.'"

Nick's interest manifestly increased.

"At Chicago he stopped for a day. From the way he inquired around, I believe he half expected to meet at that point the person or persons he was coming East to find."

"Why do you think so?"

"He consulted the registers of several hotels."

"And, meantime, this queer luggage of his?"

"He had it transferred to his room at the hotel. It was an oak box, covered with coarse, strong glazed canvas."

"Was it reshipped from Chicago?"

"It was."

"How?"

"By express."

"To what address?"

"I don't know. You see," confessed Dorval, in an embarrassed way, "I confined my attentions to the man pretty exclusively. I was afraid of losing him. It was no mean task chasing a fellow of his cleverness half way across the continent."

"No, indeed," admitted Nick.

"Now, about that box. I want to tell you something that may make up for the blunders you have made me see."

"Ah!" nodded Nick, encouragingly.

"I got into his room in Chicago."

"At his hotel?"

"Yes. I looked over his luggage, hoping to discover some clew to his intentions, some private correspondence."

"You failed?"

"I found nothing, but—my curiosity incited me. I got at that box."

Nick foresaw that something was coming, for the man from Denver was growing excited.

"You opened it?"

"I ripped a few stitches in the canvas

cover, stripped it down a foot or two, and pried up the nailed down top."

"What did you find?"

"A burial casket."

CHAPTER V.

"MISSING."

Nick Carter was profoundly interested in the extraordinary statement of the man from Denver.

"The oak box contained a casket?" he echoed.

"Yes."

"And inside of that?"

"I do not know."

"You feared to venture further?"

"I was considerably shocked, and I feared Devereaux's return and my discovery. I replaced box cover and canvas. There, you have my story."

It had been a strange and enlightening one to the veteran detective.

Nick did not reveal the thoughts suggested by the same, any more than did he tell of the complication in affairs at the young broker's apartments.

"You have been on this man's trail for quite a time, Mr. Dorval?" he remarked.

"Yes."

"In disguise."

"In a variety of disguises—the one I wear at present I adopted at Chicago."

It was a very complete one, and Nick wondered what that made-up face would look like divested of its "artificial trimmings."

"Even my voice," explained Dorval, with some pride—"see?"

He opened his mouth. Nick observed that he had some kind of a contrivance set at both sides and running under the tongue, that cut his tones into a kind of a lisp.

"Very clever," commended Nick.

The detective glanced at his watch—nearly an hour had been consumed by their colloquy.

"Mr. Dorval," he said, noting an increasing weariness on the part of the Denver man, "as the Chief has not returned, it is possible that he may be detained longer than he anticipated. I was about to make a suggestion."

"Yes?"

"Suppose you seek rest—you need it badly—slight medical attention as well. Let me see you safely to some hotel."

"Very well—the nearest. I can see the Chief in the morning."

"I will make an appointment for ten o'clock."

"And will you be here yourself?"

"Yes."

Nick conducted his companion to a hotel less than two squares distant.

He saw him comfortably disposed for the night, and returned to Police Headquarters.

There he found the Chief had just arrived.

The Chief handed him two photographs.

"The broker, Mr. Edwin Lewis," observed Nick, inspecting one.

"Yes."

"And the serving-maid, Mary Bronson—a good-looking girl."

"Is she not? Mr. Carter, I had not the heart to startle Miss Warren with what we had apparently discovered."

"Apparently only," said the detective.

"Ah?"

"My view of the matter has received entire confirmation."

The Chief expressed his wonder.

Nick related the developments of the past two hours.

The Chief listened with the attention and reverence he would bestow on some wonderful magician.

"This is remarkable!" he declared.

"No—quite natural," corrected Nick.

"I simply stumbled over the man. I think we have the matter now in pretty clear grasp."

"Yes—there was a distinct purpose in all this Devereaux did. Perhaps the Warrens might have known him——"

"In the past? I will look up that phase of the matter to-morrow. The satchel is the one from the bank?" inquired Nick, glancing at a package the Chief had placed on his desk.

"Yes, Miss Warren identified it."

"Very well. Have you some telegraph blanks?"

The Chief passed a pad over to his companion.

For ten or fifteen minutes Nick was busy filling out several of these.

One was directed to home headquarters. It was to Chick, in New York City. Nick instructed his ever-reliable assistant to visit the receiving offices of the various express companies, and explained why.

Nick was interested in that oak box containing so singular a "curio" as a burial casket, and was determined to have a look at it himself.

The other telegrams comprised instructions to select men in the New York secret service to watch certain railroads centering there.

A description of the notorious Captain Montague Devereaux accompanied these.

This same description Nick now handed to the Chief at his side.

This was soon being wired to the various city sub-stations.

Nick's work for the night was not yet done. Informing the Chief of the appointment for ten o'clock the next morning, Nick left headquarters.

He had put in some hard work since his first arrival there, but his labors for the night were not yet concluded.

Nick proceeded first to the place where Devereaux had put up with the gambling crowd from Chicago.

All hands had disappeared; the quest in this direction proved fruitless.

He next proceeded to the Continental Hotel.

He found Miss Warren less concerned about her mother, for the latter was now sleeping quietly.

Her anxiety for her absent maid and lover was intense, however.

Nick knew how to handle people aptly; that was his world-wide reputation.

To apprise this delicate, confiding young girl of the true state of affairs was a far different task.

But Nick's fatherly way, his diplomatically gradual revelations, made it possible to unfold what he had to divulge without causing the beautiful Miss Warren a shock.

At last she knew all. Her loyal nature rose above the anxieties of the occasion.

Still, her confidence in the celebrated detective, the man of great deeds and great heart, was her sole stay amid practical beggary and the loss of the man she had expected to wed that same week.

"We will go back to Byrn Manor," she said; "and—oh, Mr. Carter! the first discovery——"

"Of the whereabouts of Mr. Edwin Lewis shall be communicated to you—even before the police authorities are informed," promised Nick.

The detective made some inquiries as to the possibility of this Devereaux having been a friend or an acquaintance of the family in years past.

The inquiries were fruitless—name and description bore no suggestiveness to the troubled daughter of an aristocratic house.

At ten o'clock next morning the Philadelphia Chief of Police sat at his desk.

He had Nick Carter's appointment in mind, and he drummed with his finger tips impatiently as the hour hand closely covered the X.

To the tap of the great city bell the New York detective entered the official presence.

"Three telegrams," declared the Chief.

"For me?" asked Nick.

"Yes."

The Chief glanced eagerly, hungrily, at the sealed messages.

Nick's sensational procedure, the element of mystery and uncertainty in the Warren case, had aroused his curiosity.

Nick did not at once open the telegrams.

Poising them in his hand, he said:

"Before I open these, I wish to tell you something."

"Something new?"

"And important, I fear."

"What do you mean?"

"Some further handiwork, I fancy, of this kind of daring criminals and plotters—Captain Montague Devereaux."

"Tell me."

"The man from Denver has not been here?"

"Not yet."

"Nor will he come."

"Explain your meaning."

"On my way here, half an hour ago, I called for him at the hotel where I left him."

"He had departed?"

"Involuntarily."

"Another mystery!" ejaculated the Chief, arising to his feet in extreme excitement.

"Yes," said Nick, gravely—"from all I can judge, this man has been spirited away, like those other two."

"The broker—the serving-maid!"

"You shall judge for yourself. On account of his somewhat shattered condition, he asked for a retired room."

"Which was given to him?"

"Yes, at the end of the third floor. When I called for him he had not made his appearance. I went up to his room. I knocked. No answer. I looked through the keyhole and then over the transom, and I saw enough to warrant me in instantly calling the hotel watchman."

"He was gone?" inquired the Chief,

wrought up to no ordinary suspense and anxiety.

"He was gone. There was an unmistakable taint in the air of the room. To make a long story short, he had been drugged and kidnapped."

"How?"

"A window opened on a roof. It was that of an old, unused building. The window came level with the roof, and it had been forced from the outside. There was an open trap-way, an open rear door on the ground floor, and there were the marks of carriage wheels in the soft earth of the alley."

"Mr. Carter, this is amazing!"

"Yes," said Nick, coolly, "we have an amazing man to deal with."

"He is determined to remove every witness—to baffle us at every turn."

"Oh! his turn will come. Ah! they have him!"

Nick had opened one of the telegrams, and he nodded at its contents with satisfaction.

"They have got our man!" inquired the Chief, eagerly.

"Yes."

"In New York?"

"Arrested on a Pennsylvania Railroad ferryboat."

"Good!"

"It seems——"

"Well, what is the matter?"

Something was the matter—Nick's face betrayed the fact only too plainly.

He had opened the second telegram.

"There is some mistake!" he murmured.

"How?" interrupted the Chief, almost painfully.

"Of course both are not right," went on Nick, musingly.

"Both of whom?"

"Why, here are three telegrams," explained Nick.

"I see."

"All from—yes," as he tore open the

third and hastily scanned its signature—"all from secret service men in New York City."

"The people to whom you telegraphed the description of Devereaux last evening?" asked the Chief.

"Yes, three of the number."

"And they have found out something?"

"It seemed so."

"Seemed? What do you mean, Mr. Carter?"

"This," answered Nick—"those three men wire me that they have arrested Devereaux."

"Not all of them!"

"Yes," answered Nick Carter—"each man telegraphs that he has the criminal in custody. In other words, these messages involve the startling impossibility that three trusted secret service men arrested this morning, at three different depots, on three separate lines of railroad centering at New York City, three separate and distinct Captain Montague Devereauxs!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY.

Nick Carter took the first train to New York City.

Affairs were becoming dense and mysterious, but his master mind ably grasped the situation.

In the absence of established facts, he was compelled to proceed on conjecture.

Nick did not believe that his intuition would mislead him. There seemed only one way to figure out the latest complication of the hour.

The bank thief and arch schemer, Devereaux, had cleared the Philadelphia field as though those who stood in his way were mere puppets.

"He is a superior man—I must meet this gentleman personally!" was Nick Carter's grim determination.

The Philadelphia end of the affair the detective left in the hands of the Chief of Police.

There was not much to do for that officer and his men, except to endeavor to secure some trace of the broker, the serving-maid and the Denver detective, who were all at present "missing."

Nick was certain that the central actor in all this confusion and action, Devereaux himself, had proceeded to New York City.

He based the assumption on what he considered good grounds, and we shall see that his native detective acumen did not delude him.

The king confidence man had certainly employed his gambling contingent to assist him in his plans.

It was Nick's belief that there was some ulterior purpose in all that Devereaux had done.

To conceal his purpose and to prevent her being used as a witness against him, Devereaux had connived at the abduction of the serving-maid, Mary Bronson.

To further guard himself against discovery, he had included Mr. Edwin Lewis in his plan of kidnapping.

He must have had numerous and able assistants to thus carry into captivity two persons in broad daylight.

His scheme to foist the theft of the fifty thousand dollars on Mary Bronson might not have miscarried, had not Nick Carter come upon the scene.

The fellow, Nick reasoned further, must have had expert scouts on duty as well as trustworthy assistants, for he must have been informed of Nick's companionship with the man from Denver.

They had, therefore, snuffed out the Denver man and they had removed the broker and the serving-maid.

Leaving a clear field behind him, the plotter, Nick surmised, had made all preparations to change the scene of his schemes to New York.

He must know now that his description was well known to the police.

The full meaning of the triple arrest, of course Nick Carter did not comprehend until he arrived on home soil.

He went at once to Police Headquarters. There, stationed in a private apartment, where he could be undisturbed, he sent in turn for the three officers who had telegraphed him at Philadelphia.

Their stories bore a remarkable resemblance.

One had caught his man on a Pennsylvania Railroad ferryboat.

The second had captured his at the Reading line depot.

The third had come upon his prisoner as he was landing at the foot of Desbrosses street.

It was assumable that the trio had arrived by three different railroad lines.

It began to dawn upon the officers that there was a serious mistake somewhere along the line, as the consultation brought out the facts of a triple catch.

Still, there was a plausible presumption that among the three prisoners one might be the person wanted.

"Bring your men here," directed Nick.

An hour later that room was the scene of a rather peculiar investigation.

Three men had been produced on Nick's mandate.

At a glance the detective realized that none of the trio was the person wanted.

A remarkable outcome of the affair was the discovery that each of the trio was in a measure entirely innocent of wrong-doing.

One was a laborer, the second a street peddler, the third a cheap lodging-house habitue.

They had in turn been selected in Philadelphia by three different flashily-dressed men, members, undoubtedly, of the gambling contingent of Captain Devereaux.

Solicited separately, they had been duped by the clever story of a wager.

They were nothing loth to each receive a new suit of clothes, a free ticket to New York, and assume a facial disguise for the sake of the five dollar bill awarded in addition.

Nick told the officers of their failure to secure the real man wanted, and set the three character actors at liberty.

Chick greeted him as he reached home. Nick led the way at once to his cozy, secluded library.

"You got my telegram, Chick?" was the detective's first question.

"Last night, yes."

"What have you run down?"

"A trace."

"Of the oak box."

"Yes—a box answering its description arrived in New York day before yesterday."

"Addressed?"

"'Samuel Farr.'"

"To be called for?"

"That was it."

"And called for——"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Did the company deliver it?"

"They did—on request."

"Where?"

"At a vacant building on Houston street."

"Ah!"

"The driver of the express wagon was lazy, and gives only a vague description of the man who was waiting there to receive it."

"It went into the building?"

"Into the vacant store, through it, and was placed on another wagon at the rear."

"And taken——"

"I am in hopes of ascertaining that," declared Chick, "before nightfall."

"Very good. Of course you wish to know the full particulars of this affair, so far as developed?"

"Of course I do."

Nick gave the necessary details; he had an attentive and interested auditor.

"What is your desire?" inquired Chick, when the detective had concluded.

"To find this man, Devereaux, of course."

"And your theory?"

"That he is in New York."

"You believe he has abandoned the Philadelphia end?"

"Until he has consummated what he originally came from Denver to accomplish at this point."

"The oak box has something to do with it?"

"I think so."

"I expect to find it, although it had a three hours' start of me?"

"Catch up with it, if you can. This Captain Devereaux is a daring and original character, whose very high-handed recklessness helps him out. While those three men were personating him, he slipped by the officers in some new guise."

"But his idea?"

"Why, he calculated that one of the three must be apprehended. That would temporarily put the police off the trail, and enable him to seek safe cover."

"Mr. Carter."

With a deferential tap at the door, Nick's man servant intruded a questioning face.

"What is it?" inquired the detective.

"A gentleman has been here twice to see you this morning."

"And is here again."

"Yes, sir."

At this moment the caller in question brushed unceremoniously by the servant.

"Ah, Mr. Carter!" he exclaimed.

"Why—Dorval!" muttered the detective.

"Yes, I'm here."

"You are welcome. Chick, Mr. Dorval—the gentleman from Denver I told you about."

"In your line, you know," smiled the intruder.

Chick extended his hand. In seizing it the new-comer turned his back to Nick.

Quick-witted Chick read something enigmatical in the face of his chief.

He could not precisely make it out, but he understood what a hasty movement of Nick's hand meant.

It said plainly:

"Leave me alone with this man."

Chick murmured a welcome, glanced at his watch, affected a business appointment, and withdrew.

He closed the door after him, and walked to a window in the next apartment looking out on the street.

Chick kept his ear bent towards the room where he had left Nick and his caller.

Expectantly he awaited some token from Nick, for that brief mute signalling, Chick felt sure, held some potent meaning.

It was ten minutes before Nick came out.

He went over to his assistant at once.

"Chick," said Nick, "I have met with

some strange surprises in my experience."

"Many, yes, I know—part of the business," nodded Chick, tersely.

"There is the crowning piece of audacity."

"Where?"

"In that room."

"The man from Denver—Dorval, the detective?"

"No, it is not Dorval, the detective."

"But you introduced him by that name."

"Of necessity."

"Then——"

"That man," declared Nick, lowering his tones in a guarded way—"that man is Captain Montague Devereaux!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN CLOSE COMPANY.

"Incredible!" exclaimed Chick.

For the moment, inured as he was to the many astounding surprises of his profession, Chick could not entirely contain himself.

Then his glance found steadiness as he surveyed the superbly unmoved face, the clear, steady eye of the great master of detective science before him.

"You know that?" he murmured, less emotionally.

"I know it," affirmed Nick.

"This man is Devereaux?"

"Positively."

"Does he suspect that you have recognized him?"

"Hardly."

"And he hopes to deceive you. His audacity is beyond belief!"

Nick smiled inscrutably.

"I told you he was an original character, Chick."

"He must be extremely bold to face you in this way."

"There is a page in the criminal record about this man, Chick," observed the detective, "that may give you a clearer insight into his character."

"Indeed?"

"This fellow lived on the Prince of Wales, in the role of a Tuscan noble, for three weeks."

"Oh! did he?"

"And, cornered in a Paris counting-

room by its millionaire proprietor, he took off his coat and coolly played the part of a new employee until he had stowed away in his various pockets something like sixty thousand francs in securities."

"But that was only a prince and a millionaire."

"Yes."

"Whereas, you are—Nick Carter!"

"Well—we shall see. Now he plays to make himself safe. And he is safe—for the time being."

"You mean?"

"That this fellow is a cool, clever, calculating man, willing to take big risks. He does not believe that I suspect him. He thinks that I really accept him as the man from Denver, and that I believe his story."

"What is his story?"

"That he was abducted from a Philadelphia hotel and dropped into the river."

"Escaping?"

"Of course. He is superbly made up, and he is posted on Dorval details down to all the minutiae—the lisp, the disguises, and all the rest that the man from Denver told me in Philadelphia."

"And what is his game?"

"To watch me. To see that I do not spoil his game. He infers that he can show himself boldly under my wing. If he thinks I suspect him——"

"What then?"

"I do not believe he will make a break."

"What! he would stay with you?"

"Right by me. He counts on this—that I am too wise to expose him at this stage of the affair. Against that event he knows, as a dernier resort, that he can play the lives of the three people in Philadelphia, the stolen Warren fortune, and the mystery of the oak box."

"Then you are going to give him line?"

"All he wants of it."

"Suppose he has in his calculations some scheme to make away with you?"

"I shall be on my guard."

"You will house him, accept him, go with him?"

"Wherever he leads."

"Well, you know best."

"I do, indeed, Chick."

"And—it beats me!"

"It shan't me, Chick."

Nick Carter spoke confidently; he was sure of himself; but, then, Nick Carter had done what probably no other person in existence could have done.

He had penetrated the disguise of the pretended Denver detective before he had spoken a second sentence.

He had traced from calculation, then intuition, and finally from keen, knowing exploration, the real identity of the remarkable imposter who had ventured to put his arm veritably in the lion's mouth.

That single second when the man's back was turned to him had sufficed to enable Nick to overcome a little natural amazement.

Two minutes thereafter he had the man completely at his ease.

He purposely led him away from all pitfalls. Slick as this man was, Nick could have tripped him on half a dozen vital points in the real Dorval's layout to which he did not correspond.

To half unmask or abash him, by annoying questions, would be to awaken his suspicions; and Nick Carter too keenly enjoyed the new sensation of leading an audacious criminal under his own roof to his fate, to spoil the final effect by haste or hazard the fortunes and welfare of his victims.

When he went back to his guest, Nick found him smoking one of his best cigars with zest and in entire comfort.

The impostor took up matters where Nick had left them off, with the real Dorval in Philadelphia, as smoothly as though he had been an actual party to that interview.

Nick treated him in return as though he were worthy of every confidence; he narrated the incident of the Chief's office, the three telegrams, and the trio of dupes rounded up at the New York end of the line.

"And what is your idea now, Carter?" asked his visitor.

"Why, we must find Devereaux."

"Of course—but how?"

"By looking for him."

"I shall help you. Ah! eleven o'clock. I have a little business to attend to of a personal nature."

"Very well," said Nick.

"And, later—say this afternoon—we might take a scurry together."

"I am ready for a 'scurry,' yes," said Nick, with a grave face.

"Working together, we are likely to pick up this man at any time."

"Why not?"

"Say between two and four o'clock?"

"I will be awaiting you here at two promptly."

Nick's guest left the house. At the next corner a modest-looking young lady took up his trail.

It was Ida, posted by Nick, the result of instructions given to Chick.

Nick did not leave the house. At about one o'clock Patsy came in.

"Word from Ida," he reported; "I crossed her trail."

"Very good," nodded Nick.

"She followed that man—I followed her. He is coming back here now, but she fancied you might want to know about things in advance."

"Certainly."

"And she didn't want to lose sight of him until his safe arrival here."

"That is right."

"The man went to a house on Eighteenth street, passed it twice, rang the door-bell, and was answered by a servant. He asked for Prince Barthelme."

"For whom?" interrogated Nick.

"Prince Barthelme. The servant said he was not at home."

"And then?"

"Our man left a message."

"Ida caught it?"

"Plainly spoken—from the next doorway."

"What was it?"

"Tell the Prince to come to the Waldorf Hotel at precisely three o'clock."

Nick took in all these points attentively.

"A gentleman from the West wishes to see him in regard to the sale of some oak furniture."

"Ah!" uttered Nick, speculatively. "Here he is—there is no need of his seeing you, Patsy."

Patsy disappeared. A minute later the pretended Dorval entered the room.

He chatted pleasantly until two o'clock arrived. Then he proposed the "scurry" he had alluded to before noon.

Nick took him out to lunch—suggested that he make his rooms not only his

headquarters, but a home during his stay in the city.

To this the man from Denver was entirely agreeable.

Nick had in mind all that Patsy had reported of Ida's discoveries.

Nick knew by the movements of his companion that he was headed for the Waldorf as they sauntered along.

It lacked ten minutes of three o'clock when they came in sight of the hotel entrance.

"By the way, Carter," said Nick's companion, familiarly, halting, "I have a little incidental business in the hotel."

"All right."

"And I want you to come with me."

"I shall be pleased."

"You see, it will only consume a few moments of time."

"Some friend?"

"Well, rather an acquaintance."

"From the West?"

"Yes. It was only by chance I met him. I was told that I would find him here, but that was before I left Denver."

"I see."

"He is a prince."

"What?"

"Yes, a genuine prince of some small European principality, but he has blue blood and all that."

"What is his name, may I ask?"

"Prince Barthelme."

Nick mentally chronicled his companion's truthfulness in verifying Ida's report, and his evasion of the fact that he very well knew that he would meet the Prince in question.

Nick doubted if the man was such in fact, but he was sure of one point: Devereaux had a motive in taking him into the company of this new character in the affair.

"One favor, Carter?" proceeded Devereaux.

"Name it."

"Don't allude to me as Dorval."

"No?"

"Not in this august presence."

"Ah, you have reasons?"

"Cogent ones—you know the necessities of the profession?"

"Surely. What shall I call you?"

"Nothing at all."

"The occasion may arise for giving you a name."

"I won't let it."

"I am to just take matters as they come?"

"That's it."

Nick wondered what was impending. They entered the lobby.

Then Devereaux made a tour of the lower public rooms of the hotel.

"There he is," he announced, looking at the door of the smoking-room.

Nick saw a fine, aristocratic-looking man of about forty.

There was certainly a high-bred bearing to this individual.

But for a look of painful intensity and care in his face, he would have seemed entirely distinguished.

"Ah, Prince!"

He was standing near a window, and he turned sharply at the greeting.

His pale face twitched, and he refused to accept Devereaux's outstretched hand.

"Just recognized you," went on Devereaux, volubly. "Thought I would speak. Long in New York?"

The Prince made an indistinct response. Nick found it hard to analyze him.

He seemed struggling to control himself, and intense dislike of Devereaux was apparent in his every look and movement.

"Let me introduce a friend," said Devereaux.

The Prince inclined his head stiffly.

"Mr. Nick Carter, the celebrated New York detective."

Nick had not been expecting this.

Neither, apparently, had the Prince.

At the mention of that name, Prince Barthelme turned ghastly, clutched at a chair, and stood blankly staring at Nick Carter's face in a frozen, frightened way.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRINCE BARTELM.

Nick comprehended at once that Devereaux was playing him against the Prince Barthelme.

The emotion of the latter was unaccountable. He seemed utterly overpowered, and he sank to one of the leather-cushioned chairs like a man collapsing.

"Leave him to me!" whispered Devereaux to Nick.

"But if I can be of any assistance?"

"None whatever. I thoroughly understand our friend."

Devereaux rather pressed Nick toward the doorway. He plainly manifested that his presence was no longer necessary.

The detective sauntered out into the next room, but he kept an eye on the two he had left behind.

Devereaux stood awaiting some sign from the stricken Prince.

At last the latter looked up and started in a fierce and aggressive way.

A few whispered words drove the color anew from his face.

Devereaux continued to speak. Gradually over the Prince's face there crept an expression indicative of signal, subservient defeat.

"Anything wanted?" whispered a voice near Nick Carter's ear.

Patsy was two feet away, his back turned to Nick.

"Yes," answered the detective. "You see the man who just got up from the chair?"

"In the smoking-room?"

"The same."

"I see him."

"Keep him in view."

"Very good," replied Patsy.

"He calls himself—or is called—the Prince Barthelme."

"And is not?"

"You find that out."

"It must be the man Ida reported."

"Yes."

"Then I know where he lives."

"On Eighteenth street. They are separating. Don't lose the man. Report by six."

Devereaux was now coming towards Nick. With hasty but rather unsteady footsteps, the Prince was making for another doorway.

"It seems to me," observed Nick, as Devereaux came up, "that your friend acknowledged my introduction in a rather unusual manner."

"Did you notice it?" smiled Devereaux.

"Could I fail to?"

"Don't you understand?"

"Really—no."

"I put you up on purpose."

"Oh!"

"Yes. You can imagine what a man tortured with fear and dread might think

at being introduced to the greatest detective in the country!"

"Thank you; but why should he?"

"To tell the truth, Carter," said Devereaux, "I expect to trace my two mine wreckers through that fellow."

"And he a Prince!"

"Oh! royalty is human."

"He mingled in that steal?"

"No, he didn't, to be candid; but he soiled his hands with it unwittingly, and I am playing him."

"I see."

"We have to do those things, you know?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, that is a mere incident. Thanks for your help, the fellow now thinks that I had Nick Carter and the whole New York police force at my command."

Nick knew that Devereaux was telling a story to suit himself.

He did not fancy being made a cat-paw, for this nervy fellow was certainly using him to his own personal advantage exclusively.

Still, it would not be politic to resist or resent just now, as that would arouse the suspicions of Devereaux.

The captain made a front at diligently looking for their man in several Broadway resorts.

About five o'clock they returned to the detective's house.

Devereaux professed himself tired, and said he would not go out again till morning.

Nick indulged his indolent instincts. He showed him to his room, and treated him as cordially as though he were some really honored guest.

Ida came into the detective's study about an hour later.

"I have been watching your friend from an opposite window," she reported. "He has pretty well investigated the rear elevation of the house."

"Don't interrupt him," advised Nick.

"But if he makes a definite move?"

"In that case, apprise us at once."

Patsy entered alone as Ida withdrew.

"Well?" interrogated Nick.

"Genuine."

"You mean he is a real Prince?"

"And a gentleman, from all I can learn."

"He is living at the house on Eighteenth street."

"He has been stopping there for a week."

"How do you make him out?"

"He has a good bank balance, mingles with a few exclusive people, but seems afflicted with some settled sadness."

This was all that Patsy had to report. He departed, and Nick was reflecting on the events of the day when Chick appeared.

"I have run down the box," he announced at once. "It was delivered to a man named Prince Barthelme."

"On Eighteenth street?"

"What! you know?" exclaimed Chick.

"Am I right?"

"You are right."

"The box was delivered there, you say?"

"It was. I traced the expressman after a deal of trouble. He was hired to deliver it, and a note at the same time."

"A note to the Prince Barthelme."

"Which the expressman read."

"How did that happen?"

"Well, it fell in a water puddle and came unsealed. He is a sly, Peeping Tom of a genius."

"And how did you get him to confess that?"

"Ah! I have a way of working people, it seems."

"In this case, it is evident. I presume you even learned the contents of the note?"

"I did."

"Tell me, Chick?"

"One line."

"Which said?"

"Now you have got it—and me—near you—dispose of it if you can—and dare!"

"It said that?"

"So the expressman declares."

Nick paced the floor thoughtfully.

"There is a good deal to interest in this affair," he said.

"There will be more within an hour or two," predicted Chick. "I saw the oak box in question."

"You saw it?"

"Through the window. And I am going to look into it. I have ascertained that the Prince goes out to dinner at a hotel at about seven o'clock."

"Then is your chance."

"That is the way I am reading it."

"Well, success go with you, Chick!"

CHAPTER IX.

CHALLENGED!

"You have insulted me, sir!"

"I?"

"And must fight me!"

"Fight you?"

"Ay, sir—fight me!"

Nick Carter's professional assistant found himself in something of a quandary.

Chick had told his chief that he was determined to have a look into the oak chest now in the possession of Prince Barthelme.

Towards that end Chick had bent all his energies after leaving home headquarters.

He had watched the house on Eighteenth street for half an hour, and had seen his man come out.

Prince Barthelme had moved away in the direction of the hotel where he was said to take his evening meal regularly, and Chick naturally decided the coast to be clear, for half an hour at least.

He fancied that fortune favored him. There seemed to be but one servant about the place.

This evidently was her night off, for a few moments before the Prince left the house she had come out and proceeded down the street, dressed as if for an evening's enjoyment at some place of amusement.

It took Chick a full fifteen minutes to get into the house, for it was well protected on the lower floor.

By climbing a veranda pillar he reached a window slightly up on the second floor, pushed it clear up, got over the sill, and felt himself to be at last master of the situation.

The Prince had left the gas lit in several of the lower rooms.

Chick's centre of interest was an apartment that seemed to have been especially used as a strong room when the old-fashioned house was first built.

It had but one door, and this was a marvel of strength and solidity. The room had no windows and backed against the side wall of the next building in the row.

Into the apartment described Chick made his way at once.

It contained the especial object of his interest—the oak box.

The unwieldy thing rested on two chairs.

Its canvas covering was stripped off, its top cover was loose.

Chick moved this aside; below was a burial casket.

It was metal, but of some light material like aluminum, and very thin.

Over one end was spread a large piece of cotton batting; this Chick moved aside.

He glanced through the oval glass it had concealed.

"Heavens!" uttered Nick Carter's assistant, momentarily startled.

Chick had expected to view the uncanny; he was well aware that the casket contained no "curios."

Still, he was considerably shocked, and he came out of the room satisfied.

He stood for a moment or two in the centre of the next apartment, reflecting.

What did his duty involve? An immediate return to home headquarters with a report of his discovery, or personal procedure on independent lines?

Suddenly Chick roused up. The front door clanged—its lock shot shut with a click.

Hurried footsteps came towards the room he was in.

Chick was cornered, for it had but one door.

He started for a window, tried to raise it, found it hard to move, swept his hand over a stand for a moment as he noted what it held, returned to the centre of the room, and—sat down.

It was thus that Prince Barthelme found him. He came into the room, gave utterance to a startled ejaculation, recoiled, advanced, and, filling the doorway with his figure, stared perplexedly, and then, with growing sternness, at the intruder.

"Who are you?" he hoarsely demanded.

"Well," said Chick, coolly, "I think you can see a visitor."

"How did you get into this house?"

Chick considered before replying—before he could reply at all the Prince, his brow darkening, added:

"And why?"

Chick noted his temples throb, the color come into his face, an angry, suspicious glimmer in his eyes; this was not a man to trifle with.

"Ah!" suddenly exclaimed the Prince—"you have been in that room?"

"Perhaps," acknowledged Chick.

"You have—looked!"

"Well—yes."

"You were sent? Sir, you are a spy!"

There was something majestic in the manner with which the man advanced upon Chick.

He was aflame with rage, suspicion, desperation, and he swept out his hand to strike Chick in the face with the glove it held.

"Don't do that," advised Chick, catching the glove, tearing it from the holder's grasp, throwing it to the floor and squarely facing the Prince.

"Sir!" cried the latter, his voice ringing with rage, "you have insulted me!"

"I?"

"And must fight me!"

"Fight you?"

"Ay, sir—fight me! I know your mission."

"Indeed?"

"Here are weapons, and we have both place and opportunity. Between men of honor assistants may be dispensed with. You have pried into my secrets. If you are a gentleman, you will honor the custom of my country."

"Are you mad!"

"I am neither mad nor drunk, and I demand the only satisfaction you have in your power to give. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Then——"

The Prince was pressing his point hotly. He had crossed the room to the stand near the window.

Without looking at them, he took up two pistols lying there.

He never moved his eyes from Chick—fearful that this intruder who had "seen" might escape; he seemed resolved to turn the incident into an "affair of honor."

And there was a certain desperation in his feverish, half-insane manner that suggested to Chick that possibly this foreign firebrand would readily seek death in a duel rather than have his secret exposed

and his fair name smirched, dragged into the courts of justice.

Chick humored the occasion—to gain time, to watch for or force developments that would cause this strange person to more fully reveal himself.

"Give me the weapon," said Chick, resolutely.

"Choose."

"Name your distance."

"That is your prerogative."

"I know it, but in this instance I forgo it."

"What do you think of five paces?"

"Be it five paces."

"Will you give the word?"

"Do you give it, sir."

"Are you ready?"

"Ready."

"Fire—one, two, three!"

There was no report, although the Prince snapped his pistol.

Chick did not even raise his weapon.

He smiled slightly, and coolly met the infuriated glance of the Prince.

"Sir!" raved the latter.

"The chambers of those revolvers are in my pocket," observed Chick.

"You dared——"

"My friend," observed Chick, "will you listen to a piece of advice?"

"No! ten thousand times no!"

"I have a right in this house."

"Because—because"—almost shouted the Prince, aflame with distraction, "you are another!"

"Another what?"

"Detective!"

"You guess that?"

"In my country to be thus hounded—the knout! the bastinado!"

"But this is New York."

"Seize him!"

Chick divined in a flash that this cry was not directed at himself.

His back was to the doorway, and he at once surmised that it was addressed to some person who had suddenly appeared there.

Chick turned sharply.

It was to meet a man springing at him, fairly upon him.

But obedience to the Prince's mandate failed, as the newcomer in profound surprise recognized Nick Carter's assistant.

"Ah!" he said, trying to smile, "Mr.—Chick!"

"That is it," nodded Chick, calmly.

"This is a strange place to find you?"

"And you, Mr. Dorval," responded Chick, pointedly.

The last comer was Nick Carter's impostor guest.

"Why, I——"

"Seize him!" urged the Prince, pressing close to the side of the pretended Dorval.

"Be reasonable, Prince. This gentleman——"

"Seize him, I say, for he has seen!"

A marked change crossed Devereaux's face.

"He has seen?" he repeated, slowly.

"Inside the oak box!" panted the Prince.

"Is this true?" demanded Devereaux, facing Chick in a menacing way.

"Yes, it is true."

"Then you cannot leave this house!"

"Why not? I fancy I will!"

"No!"

The pretended Denver detective had put out his hands; in a double wrist clutch Chick resisted an effort to prevent him from passing from the room.

That emphatic "No!" came from the Prince.

It turned the scales, for it was followed by a sudden assault.

Seizing a fire shovel by chance resting against a chair at his side, the Prince had dealt Chick a fearful blow.

Nick Carter's nervy assistant staggered and tried to rally, but a second blow laid him prostrate on the floor.

———

CHAPTER X.

AN EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS.

Ida had warned Nick of the evident intent of his guest to make a surreptitious departure from his room.

It was about seven o'clock when the vigilant little lady detective communicated the fact that the lights had been extinguished, a window raised, a rope ladder lowered.

Nick's assistants had put in a full day, every one of them.

It was the turn of the chief now, and Nick was not sorry that affairs promised some activity and variation.

He got to the street, and in half a min-

ute was so located that no human being could emerge from the rear without his being aware of the fact.

Posted thus, the veteran detective experienced a sensation of profound mystification, and then surprise, as he glanced back at the door of his quarters.

Approaching the house was the very man he was waiting for, to all sense and seeming.

The man from Denver stood on the sidewalk, looking steadfastly up at Nick Carter's home.

"Two of them, eh?" said Nick to himself.

The real Denver detective had come upon the scene.

Nick had his hands full, but he acted on the emergency.

He passed rapidly up to his own doorway.

"Dorval," he said.

"Mr. Carter!"

"Not a word!"

"Eh?"

Nick swept the new-comer into the hallway, and uttered a quick signal whistle.

Patsy appeared from the shadows with magical celerity.

"A man is leaving by the rear," observed Nick.

"I understand—Dorval?"

"I am Dorval!" exclaimed the new-comer, wonderingly.

"I see you are," nodded Patsy. "What shall I do?" he resumed, addressing Nick.

"If he goes into a house on Eighteenth street, as I think he will——"

"Yes?"

"Telephone."

Patsy was off like an arrow.

"Now then," said Nick, leading his bewildered visitor to his study—"so you have appeared on the scene?"

"Better late than never. But what did that young man mean by 'Dorval'?"

"I will explain."

Nick did so.

"And where have you been?" he checked the Denver man's open-mouthed amazement by inquiring.

"In Philadelphia."

"Where?"

"It reminded me of a tomb—somewhat!"

"You have been a prisoner?"

"I wouldn't have been quiet for twenty-four hours if I hadn't."

"Have you any notion of the fate of those two others?"

"Mr. Edwin Lewis—the servant girl, Mary Bronson?"

"Yes."

"They were not in the place where they kept me confined."

"How did you get away?"

"They drugged me, to carry me across the city in a wagon."

"And you refused to be drugged?"

"I slipped them in an alley by dropping out from under the straw. So that man had the audacity to steal my identity?"

"As I have told you."

"And now you will clamp down on him?"

"That depends on circumstances."

"Likely to develop to-night."

"That will tell us!"

There had come a ring at the telephone. Nick proceeded to the instrument.

"Hello!"

"Patsy?"

"Yes."

"The man went to the Eighteenth street house?"

"He is there now."

Nick returned to his guest.

He looked him over speculatively.

"Of course you are willing to obey orders?" he asked.

"Nick Carter's orders—yes."

"Come with me, then."

When Nick reached the house on Eighteenth street he left his companion in a convenient doorway, while he made a hurried inspection of the dwelling.

Then he ascended the front steps. Whoever had entered last had used a key, and carelessly had left it in the lock.

Upon this discovery, Nick beckoned to Dorval.

"Step lightly, and keep in close touch with me," he directed.

The hall was dark. Suddenly Dorval stumbled over a stand. It fell with a crash.

Nick pushed his blundering companion through a draped doorway.

As he caught the sound of a startled voice, he himself retreated under the stairway.

The fake Dorval entered the hall, and turned up a gas jet.

He scanned the upset table. Then his glance roaming, it fell upon Nick.

"Why! you have followed me?" he said, putting a bold and smiling face on the matter.

"I thought it best," nodded Nick.

"You can help me out."

"Can I, indeed?"

"Yes," asserted Devereaux, audaciously. "Come with me—I have something interesting to show you."

"But—I have a friend," observed Nick.

"Ah! a friend?" muttered Devereaux, glancing suspiciously around.

"Yes."

"I don't see him."

"I will introduce you."

Nick proceeded towards the room into which he had thrust Dorval.

He drew aside the drapery. Under this roof some surprising developments were likely to soon ensue; he took the initiative and forced them along.

"Mr. Dorval! Mr. Dorval!" said Nick.

Precisely alike, both men in borrowed garb, stared steadfastly one at the other.

"I see!" said Devereaux, his teeth closing with a snap.

"You must!"

"You knew me all along?"

"From the very first."

Devereaux made a sudden dart.

"Not so fast!" said Nick, and caught him about the waist.

"Prince!" shouted Devereaux, struggling, "it is Nick Carter! Close the door!—remember where you stand!"

Nick slipped a pair of handcuffs over the wrists of his captive.

He interlocked a second pair, backed the man to the stairway, and snapped the extra manacle about a newel post.

"What is the lay-out here?" he inquired, coolly.

"Not the most agreeable!" gritted Devereaux.

"Indeed!"

"You will find it so. I warn you!"

"Of Prince Barthelme?"

"He is a dangerous man in his present mood."

"And what is his present mood?"

"Do not tempt it."

"Oh! I must interview the gentle-

man," insisted Nick. "Have you any suggestions to make?"

Devereaux uttered a savage growl.

"You won't talk to me? Then you shall not to him," observed Nick.

He slipped an effective gag between the man's lips.

"Keep your eye on him, Dorval."

"Trust me, Mr. Carter!"

Nick had silenced the fellow. Now he advanced down the hall.

He stepped into a lighted room—it was the one where Chick had experienced his mishap of the evening.

The first thing that met the detective's glance was a heavy oaken door.

It had a window in it, or, rather, a shifting wicket of iron.

"Stand where you are!" ordered an imperative voice.

Through the wicket Nick saw a face that he recognized.

"Ah, Prince!" he nodded.

"Do not advance another step!"

"You are disposed to be tragic!"

"I am disposed to be resolute. You are Mr. Nicholas Carter?"

"As such I was introduced to you to-day."

"You are hounding me—you and your people. Very well, sir!" spoke Prince Barthelme. "Advance before I give you permission, and it will be the worse for you—and yours!"

"That is—if I advance?"

"I will certainly fire upon you—do not drive me to extremities."

"And if I gracefully retire?"

"I will sacrifice your myrmidon!"

"How is that?" questioned Nick, not comprehending.

"I have in this room, shut in with me, one of your men."

"One of my——"

"Assistants—you call him Chick."

Nick had not known that; he looked his surprise, slightly his concern.

"You have just overpowered a friend of mine," went on the Prince. "I heard the struggle—he called out to me."

"Right!" assented Nick—"what of it?"

"I wish him released."

"Ah! you wish it?"

"I insist upon it."

"On what basis?"

"I offer an exchange of prisoners."

"Oh, that is it?" said Nick, reflecting.

"Those are my terms. Mr. Carter, I am driven to the verge of madness—you and yours are urging me to desperation!"

"Let us discuss that?"

"No!"

"You insist upon having your way?"

"I do."

"You offer to release my man if I release yours?"

"Yes."

"Very well," said Nick, calmly, "I agree."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN IN THE CASKET.

When Chick rallied from the effects of those two stunning blows administered by the Prince Barthelme, he found himself in the "strong room."

Thither he had been dragged. His feet and hands were secured by stout cords, and after a vain effort to relieve himself of his bonds, he quiescently listened to the conversation going on in the outer room.

Common peril had temporarily made those two men allies.

Suddenly the Prince burst out bitterly:

"You have brought me to my doom!"

"Have you the money?"

"Of course I have the money."

"You are willing to pay it?"

"Willing and ready."

"Then——"

"But that spy has seen!"

"Still, that spy, as you call him, does not know."

"He is from Nick Carter."

"Yes."

"Then he will find out!"

"Oh! I have hopes that he will not. All will be well, Prince, if you are reasonable."

"Reasonable!"

"Yes. You forced me to act."

"You sent that horrible reminder! Remove it—help me destroy it! I will pay your price!"

"That is agreed. Then, more than that, I will make you permanently safe."

"Safe?"

"Yes—when we have disposed of the—evidence."

The Prince shuddered.

"Let us set at work at once," he exclaimed, feverishly. "Hark! did you hear that?"

"Did I hear it!"

This was at the moment when Nick Carter's companion, Dorval, had upset the stand in the dark hallway.

As Devereaux's shouts, a few moments later, rang from thence announcing his capture, warning the Prince, the latter sprang into the strong room.

He closed the door, and as its strong lock set, Chick realized that he was practically inclosed in a formidable fortress.

The Prince had lit the gas, and he had restored to the pistols the chambers taken from Chick's pocket.

Now he made a singular move, and Chick was interested.

Proceeding over to the wall, he pushed to one side an old cabinet resting there.

Chick stared. Beyond was an aperture. The brick partition wall of the next building had been pierced, the bricks removed, and there was room afforded through which not only could a man pass, but the oak box as well.

Chick recalled that the next building was vacant; Prince Barthelme, it seemed, was prepared for contingencies.

This discovery Chick was ready to announce to Nick in the other room, when the strange proposition for an exchange of prisoners had been agreed to.

"I am at liberty to withdraw for a moment or two?" inquired Nick now.

"On your word of honor that you will immediately return?"

"Yes."

"And make no move to send word outside, or summon others?"

"Positively, no—it is not necessary."

"You will make the exchange?"

"Give me eighty seconds."

Nick departed for the hall. At the end of the time appointed Chick caught the echo of his returning footsteps.

He was not alone; Chick discerned this.

"Well, here is your man," said Nick.

"Very well," said the Prince—"stand where you are. This way."

As he opened the door a form slid through.

"Mr. Carter," he observed, "within five minutes your man shall rejoin you."

"I can wait," nodded Nick, calmly.

Chick for the second time prepared to make himself heard in vigorous demur and enlightenment.

The Prince had threatened "to silence him," if he spoke; but Chick could not allow these men to disappear, and their ghostly "evidence" with them.

"Here—take these," spoke the Prince, tending his companion the pistols. "Stand guard till I get the box through the wall."

The weapons changed hands.

"Point them away from me!" ordered the Prince, irritably.

"Not till you undo that door again."

"How! Ah—you—"

"Keep still—they may go off."

"Duped!"

"You think so?"

"You are not—Devereaux!"

"Don't I look like him?"

The Prince stood spell-bound; Chick began to understand that this was a new Dorval.

"Release the prisoner!" ordered the real man from Denver.

"Undo that door, I told you," added the same speaker.

Nick Carter stepped into the apartment.

"Prince," he said, quietly, "what have we here?"

Nick advanced toward the oak box.

"Do not approach it!" cried the Prince, distracted.

Nick took a look beyond cover and lid.

"There is some explanation necessary here, it seems to me," he began, sternly.

"All is lost!" gasped the Prince. He had become ghastly.

"Give me one of those pistols!" he pleaded; "I will save you and myself trouble."

"As bad as that?" observed Nick; "you must be seriously entangled, my friend."

"Yes," said the Prince, blankly—"it is the gallows!"

"The man in that casket—"

"He was murdered!"

"By whom?"

"Do you not already know?"

Nick did not reply.

"Oh! but you are certain to find out—you, whose name fell upon my ears like a thunderclap!"

"Then who murdered him?" interrogated Nick.

"It is useless to deny—it would be only a continuation of the long agony. Take me in charge!" cried Prince Barthelme in the tones of utter despair; "I killed the man lying in yonder casket!"

CHAPTER XII.

"INVINCIBLE!"

"You confess to the killing of that man?" asked Nick.

"Yes," answered Prince Barthelme.

"When?"

"Six months ago."

"Where?"

"In Denver."

"Under what circumstances?"

"In a quarrel—over the cards. I was heated with wine. I struck him with my cane. Devereaux and his friends were witnesses. They got me away. The next week they showed me his body. It was not deliberate murder, but I had disgraced my title, my honor!"

"And what did it cost you?" asked Nick, bluntly.

"It has cost me so much, pursued from city to city by this harpy, that I am glad it is over."

"He followed you here?"

"He sent me that body. He had it preserved by some scientific process. He demanded half I had. This terrible affair has changed my nature—made me almost mad, ready to commit crime to cover my first guilt!"

Nick went back into the hallway.

"Ah!" he observed, removing his prisoner's gag—"you have had a desperate time of it?"

Devereaux had in some way kicked off both shoes.

Nick found one up the stairs.

"Where is the other?" he inquired.

"Find out!" growled Devereaux.

"Are you trying to play the insane dodge?"

"Never you mind!"

"I do mind—here," observed shrewd Nick Carter. "Chick, this fellow has not dispossessed himself of his footgear without a purpose."

A sharp hiss from the prisoner told that the detective had hit the mark squarely.

"There is the other shoe," declared Nick's assistant, pointing to where it had caught in a hanging drapery.

Nick examined it. As he manipulated a movable sole, the captain's eyes shot fire.

"You are," he said, savage but beaten, "invincible!"

That unique hiding-place, which Devereaux realized, would be searched at the police station, comprised a treasury of value.

In it was found a receipt from a safety deposit company for a package.

This turned out to be the stolen bonds and money.

The most significant discovery was a letter.

It comprised what Devereaux had mysteriously promised the Prince, when he had bled him for the final bribe.

It was signed by himself and two Denver associates, and it included references of verification.

The man in the casket was not the man the Prince supposed.

The alleged victim was in the game. A brother resembling him had died about the time of the assault.

The plotters had palmed off on the Prince this dead brother.

It was the peacefullest face Nick Carter had ever seen—that of the Prince Barthelme—when they handed him that document.

"I know that woman!"

The scene was again Philadelphia.

The man from Denver spoke the words.

"Who is she?" asked Nick Carter.

They were proceeding down Broad street, and Dorval indicated a comely young woman walking by the side of a big, strapping fellow.

The Denver man spoke too loud. The woman nudged her companion—both turned into a doorway.

"I saw that woman when I was a prisoner," declared Dorval.

"She visited the place?"

"Yes."

"Then we want her."

Nick entered the doorway; the twain had turned here to evade him. They were cornered.

It was an elevator areaway, with no other means of egress.

And the elevator was not running.

Nick advanced straight up to the woman.

"What do you want?" her companion demanded, with a belligerent swagger.

"I wish to speak to this lady."

"What about?"

"Business."

"I understand. Rose, run!"

The giant-muscled fellow threw out both hands.

They circled Nick's wrists like clamps of steel.

The girl made for the street; she caught sight of Dorval.

"Blocked!" she exclaimed.

"The elevator!" suggested her companion. "You know who this man is?"

"Yes!"

The girl ran to the elevator—she slid back its door.

She got inside and pulled on the rope; up the car started.

Crack!—crack! The man uttered a shriek of pain.

Nick had executed a superior muscular maneuver.

"You have broken both my wrists!"

"Now, my lady!" announced Nick.

He reached through the coarse meshes to the wire door and grasped the elevator cable.

"Take the next floor," called Nick to the man from Denver—and he held the elevator stationary.

"Up or down, my lady—which will it be?" he inquired.

Meek enough was she, upon realizing that the strong hand of the law was upon her.

She, a confederate of the captain, divulged what Devereaux had refused to tell—the whereabouts of the captive Mary Bronson and the broker.

From her, too, Nick got an inkling of the king forger's motive in selecting the Warrens to plunder.

He was a head-strong, resentful man, and once the husband of Mrs. Warren had been a witness against him in a criminal case.

Devereaux had threatened vengeance at some future time.

Stopping over at Philadelphia, he took

the notion to locate the family home at Byrn Manor.

He had chanced to overhear there the plans concerning the fifty thousand dollars.

It had struck him that to secure this, to dispose of witness and lover, and later, to demand the hand of the peerless Miss Lucille Warren—whose beauty had fascinated him—would be a fine play of revenge and profit.

Nick Carter had outwitted him, however.

Chick's main satisfaction was that they had downed a fellow who had had the audacity to familiarly address the great detective as "Carter!"

The man from Denver did not find the Colorado mine wreckers in New York, as he had hoped.

But he had scored the honor of striking up an acquaintance with the famous secret service expert.

The latter had agreed "to keep an eye out" for the two clever criminals still at large.

And Nick Carter never broke a promise.

[THE END.]

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